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ABSTRACT

Using a system that monitors just the process of education does not guarantee positive student outcomes. What education needs is a consistent set of accountability procedures for all students. As educators take steps toward a new and inclusive accountability system, they need to look at: (1) possible alternative approaches to accountability; (2) data needed to demonstrate that education is working for students with disabilities; and (3) barriers to the collection of these data and ways to overcome these barriers. Alternative approaches to accountability may include: focus on results or outcomes, collect information on achievement of Individualized Education Program objectives, analyze extant data, use norm-referenced tests, and create accreditation programs. Data needed include input, process, and outcome data. Barriers to collecting data include, among others, competing attitudes, lack of commitment, lack of agreement on outcomes and standards, and lack of curriculum-test alignment. Overcoming barriers involves offering staff development, involving stakeholders, mandating collection of accountability data, and other activities. (JDD)

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Educational Accountability for Students With Disabilities

Background

There is a new buzz word in current discussions about educational reform: **Accountability**. It's being defined as the use of systematic methods to demonstrate to individuals, inside and outside of the education system, that schools are moving in desired directions. Policymakers, school administrators, and the general public have joined in the debate. They want to know: Is education in the U.S. producing the results it should?

Because documenting educational effectiveness has been addressed from the local school level to the national level, many different accountability practices have been created. That is, for most students...until recently.

For students with disabilities, discussions about accountability have been restricted to "process." This means that special education has focused on child count information: How many students, and with which disabilities, are on Individualized Education Programs (IEPs)? Where do these students receive services? Are the proper procedures followed in identifying students with disabilities?

The child count and compliance data do not demonstrate that students are achieving desired results. And, using a system that monitors the process of education does not guarantee positive student outcomes. What education needs is a consistent set of accountability procedures for all students.

As educators take steps toward a new and inclusive accountability system, they need to look at:

1. **Possible alternative approaches to accountability**
2. **Data needed to demonstrate that education is working for students with disabilities**
3. **Barriers to the collection of these data.**

Armed with this information, educators can find ways to overcome barriers to implementing new forms of accountability.

Alternative Approaches

There are a number of alternative approaches that could indicate the degree to which education is working for students, including students with disabilities. Many of the following options seek to recognize student progress rather than monitor the educational process.

- **Focus on results or outcomes**
  States, local school districts, or schools specify desired criteria for achievement through outcomes-based assessments.
- **Collect IEP information**
  Educators document students' achievement of IEP objectives.

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- **Analyze extant data**

Educators look at existing data to provide information on the effectiveness of specific programs for students with disabilities.

- **Use norm-referenced tests**

Teachers give students tests like the Iowa Test of Basic Skills to measure their achievement; results from many students are combined to produce school- or district-level results.

- **Create accreditation programs**

States distribute rewards and sanctions, report student progress, and/or provide public recognition of good programs.

Some of these alternatives to child count are more effective than others at including all students. For example, students with disabilities have historically been excluded from participating in norm-referenced tests. Greater promise may exist in programs that focus on results or outcomes by using performance assessments.

Data Needed

When establishing an accountability system, first agree on what types of data are most useful and available for documenting the progress of education. Most accountability programs that include students with disabilities collect input, process, and outcome data.

Collecting input and process data provides information on the contexts in which children learn. However, this information should only supplement data collected on student outcomes. See the chart on this page for possible types of data to collect.

Barriers to Collecting Data

Some of the issues encountered in collecting accountability data pose general challenges, while others become barriers to facilitating the participation of students with disabilities in assessment programs. But there is one over-riding issue that will influence the resolution of all of the other barriers to collecting accountability data: **competing attitudes.** This includes the attitudes of educators, policymakers, parents, and students.

Possible Types of Data to Collect

- **Input Data** help to plan future budgets, identify the cost efficiency of certain programs, and indicate the needs of groups of students.
  1. Program Resources (staff, instruction, and other resources allotted to each child)
  2. Student Characteristics (student mobility, number receiving free/reduced lunch)

- **Process Data** include information on the type and quality of, and access to certain programs.
  1. Opportunity to Learn
  2. Inclusion of Students with Disabilities in General Education
  3. Teacher Expectations for Individual Pupil Performance
  4. Extent to which IEPs Translate into Instruction

- **Outcomes Data** contain the most crucial information for making decisions about whether education is working for students.
  1. Academic and Functional Skills
  2. Valued Social and Emotional Outcomes
  3. Generalization of School Learning to Everyday Life
  4. Student and Parent Satisfaction
  5. Independent Living
  6. Community Participation
  7. Extent to Which the "Product" of Schools Meets the Needs of the Labor Market

Data that Administrators Need to Demonstrate that Education Works for Students with Disabilities

Issues Encountered

Competing Attitudes

Commitment

Worth?, Fear, and Control

Role of the State

Sanctions and Rewards

Responsibility for Student Learning

Inclusion in Assessment

Nongraded Classrooms

Agreeing on Outcomes and Standards

Curriculum-Test Alignment

Measuring Complex Skills

What and How to Report the Information

Perception that Data Have No Utility

▶ *Stakeholder Commitment and Mistrust*

Stakeholders may not be ready to **commit** to accounting for the results of education or collection of data. They might be concerned that a shift of resources from direct service to data collection would cause educators and the public to become skeptical. They might ask: **Is it worth it?** Or, they may be **fearful** that an accountability program would cause them to lose **local control**.

Educational reform can sometimes foster mistrust among stakeholders. The **role of the state** needs to be determined without increasing stakeholder fear of losing local control. Decide whether the state's role should be a top-down or a bottom-up approach to collecting accountability data. This can have a big impact. For example, if the state decides to mandate an assessment in order to facilitate data aggregation, the instruction and testing decisions in local schools will be affected.

▶ *Educator Responsibility*

Some educators may be reluctant to be held responsible for the educational gains of students with disabilities or low performing students, especially if **sanctions and rewards** are steep. But the fact is, students with disabilities now spend more time in general education than special education. **Responsibility for student learning** should reflect the multiple contexts in which students are being educated. But, this is easier said than done.

Collecting accountability data on how well students with disabilities perform also poses a challenge. Often, these students have not experienced **inclusion in traditional assessments**. The practice of collecting data on some but not all students has led to sorting and ranking. Equitable policy decisions and fair comparisons between schools, districts, and states require that data collection be systematic and accurately represent the educational needs and accomplishments of all students, not just general education students.

Common reasons for educators to exclude students with disabilities in testing programs are:

- The outcomes or standards are inappropriate for some students with disabilities.
- The accommodations needed as a result of the student's disability are unavailable or invalidate the test.
- Some students with disabilities may be in **nongraded classrooms**, making it difficult to determine inclusion.

As educators move beyond the issue of inclusion, **agreeing on outcomes and standards** becomes the next controversial issue. To reach consensus among all stakeholders, they must define outcomes that are important for all students without lowering the standards; balance post-school transition and academic outcomes; and set quality outcomes and standards that are congruent with those of other states.

▶ *Using Assessments to Measure and Report Data*

Education must provide all students with the opportunity to learn the skills necessary to achieve the set standards. Assessments should reflect what these students are learning in the classroom. To monitor whether this is happening, states use **curriculum-test alignment**.

It is possible that states could decide to first administer assessments that reflect state outcomes and then expect curriculum adjustments to follow. Or states could modify the curriculum first and then develop assessments that are instructionally relevant and sensitive to the change. But, lately

the issue of assessments has beome more complex. As educators attempt to document higher-order skills such as creativity, synthesis, and interpersonal skills, they are finding less agreement on **how to measure complex skills**.

Once assessments are administered, **what information should be reported and how should it be reported?** States need to be able to not only identify students with disabilities in large data sets, but also to:

- Report on their performance
- Document the number of students with disabilities who do not participate in the assessment program
- Report results together with, or separate from, those of general education students.

When an accountability program is in place, developers, participants, and consumers may be concerned that there is **no utility** to the program. There is a risk that no one will understand or benefit from the information presented, particularly if a lot of contextual data are included. The utility of an accountability program rests on its ability to use the data to promote positive educational reform.

Overcoming Barriers

To overcome barriers in establishing new forms of accountability systems, choose options that consider the state's role. There are a number of strategies, but staff development and stakeholder involvement are crucial to implementing a successful accountability program.

▶ *Essential Strategies*

Offering staff development increases stakeholders' knowledge of and reduces the fear of accountability systems. Those fears often come from a lack of technical knowledge about the systems and how to implement them.

Involving stakeholders up front decreases the fear of losing local control. It also increases the likelihood that the program will build upon pre-existing local accountability structures and will include instructionally relevant and intelligible data on outcomes that are important to parents, advocates, teachers, employers, and students.

▶ *State Mandates and Guidelines*

Another strategy is for states to mandate the collection of accountability data on all students. States must be prepared to enforce the policy and to provide programs that offer the technical support necessary to ensure success. If states develop guidelines for assessment accommodations and participation in assessments, they can help overcome barriers to implementing accountability systems. But, this will happen only if they include students with disabilities in testing.

To increase the participation of students with disabilities, states need to develop outcomes that are comprehensive and broad enough to be meaningful for all students. Progress toward achieving the outcomes may be monitored via a state data base that allows outcomes and contextual data to be stored and analyzed. The data base must be set up to allow separating out assessment data for students with disabilities, a capability needed to examine the

What to Consider in Overcoming Barriers

- Offer Staff Development
- Get Stakeholders Involved Up Front
- Mandate Collection of Accountability Data
- Develop State Guidelines on Inclusion and on Accommodation
- Build a Comprehensive State Data Base
- Gain Consensus on Outcomes
- Include Students With Disabilities in Testing
- Disaggregate Data
- Hold Systems Accountable for Creating an Environment in Which Students Can and Will Learn
- Provide Incentives
- Accredit Local School Systems
- Learn from Other States

effectiveness of special education and other programs.

State mandates are preferable to possible federal mandates or rewards and sanctions as part of special education funding. States also need to be aware that direct federal involvement may meet resistance because:

- Allocating resources based upon students meeting state standards will be viewed as a disservice to programs serving students with disabilities;
- It is unlikely that the federal government could effectively and efficiently regulate the progress of students with disabilities toward standards; and
- The division between special and regular education might be perpetuated.

▶ *Achieving Success*

Success depends on being able to provide a system that creates an environment in which all students can and will learn. This requires greater participation on the part of educators. Any resistance could be overcome by providing incentives such as more focused technical assistance, or accreditation for schools that facilitate the progress of their students toward state outcomes.

A successful, yet simple strategy to overcome barriers is to learn from past efforts. Those developing and implementing accountability programs can benefit from ideas and examples of effective programs used by other states. NCEO's report, *Implementation of Alternative Methods for Making Educational Accountability Decisions for Students with Disabilities*, summarizes and provides concrete examples of six states' approaches to accountability.

▶ Recommendations

- Create an accountability program that holds systems responsible for providing environments in which students can and will learn. Such a program would rely on student outcomes rather than child count data.
- Look at NCEO's *Self-Study Guide to the Development of Educational Outcomes and Indicators* to help develop and gather support for targeted student outcomes.
- Give careful thought to creating incentives for people to change the ways in which they gather data on identified student outcomes. These incentives may be in the form of sanctions and rewards, added technical support, or special reports on the data.
- Make certain that the data collection program makes sense to those who implement it. Thus, stakeholder involvement and buy-in up front is critical.
- Provide resources for teacher training, but do not invent new data collection activities. Data that are used will make more sense to those who collect them. This may include reporting data separately to indicate the effectiveness of special programs.
- Make sure all levels of accountability profess an attitude supporting the need for accountability and a commitment to data collection.

▶ Further Information

Implementation of Alternative Methods for Making Educational Accountability Decisions for Students with Disabilities (Synthesis Report 12). Ysseldyke, J.E., Thurlow, M. L. & Geenen, K.M. (1994). Minneapolis, MN: National Center on Educational Outcomes.

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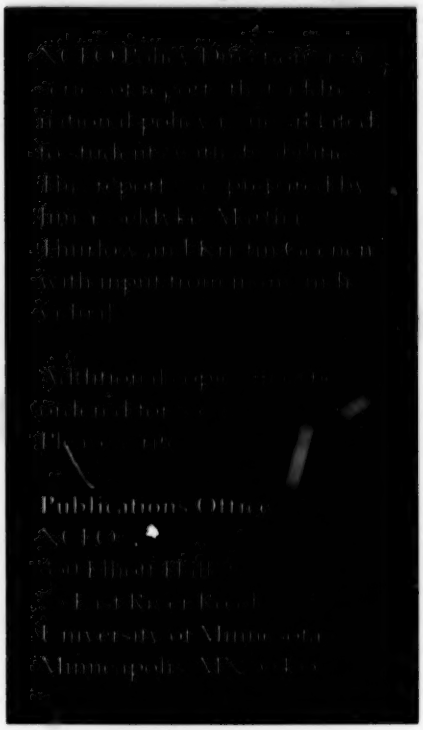
Views on Inclusion and Testing Accommodations for Students with Disabilities. Ysseldyke, J.E., & Thurlow, M. L. eds. (1993). Minneapolis, MN: National Center on Educational Outcomes.

NOTE: This document was prepared with input from participants in a meeting of selected state personnel held in Chicago in September 1993. Representatives from the following states participated in this meeting: Illinois, Iowa, Kentucky, Maryland, Michigan, and West Virginia. Some of the ideas reflected in this document are based also on discussion at a

special forum on educational evaluation sponsored by the National Association of State Directors of Special Education in August 1993. ▲



About NCEO

The National Center on Educational Outcomes (NCEO), established in 1990, works with state departments of education, national policy-making groups, and others to facilitate and enrich the development and use of indicators of educational outcomes for students with disabilities. It is believed that responsible use of such indicators will enable students with disabilities to achieve better results from their educational experiences.

The Center represents a collaborative effort of the University of Minnesota, the National Association of State Directors of Special Education, and St. Cloud State University.

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